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# RISING TENSION IN THE NORMALISATION PROCESS: LACHIN CORRIDOR

The second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which occurred in 2020, resulted in substantial alterations in the Caucasus area. These changes extended beyond the region's map. Azerbaijan liberated most of its occupied territories during the 1990s war and has gained increasing military and diplomatic power in the region. As of 2020, peace discussions are ongoing, but no resolution has emerged as of yet. Since January 2023, the Lachin Corridor, an area

of geopolitical significance, has become increasingly tense. This article will discuss the normalisation process between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey's involvement as a neighbouring country, the causes of tension in the Lachin Corridor, and the current situation.

Azerbaijan lost control of many regions to Armenia during the conflicts between 1988-1994. This conflict, resulting from

policies implemented in the latter years of the Soviet Union, persisted following the dissolution of the USSR. Over a million Azerbaijanis were forced to vacate their homes. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that Azerbaijani communities residing in and around Nagorno-Karabakh fled to evade persecution and hostility from Armenia. From 1991 onwards, Armenian assaults have occupied a range of territories, including Khankendi, Lachin, Kalbajar, and Aghdam. In addition, the Khojaly Massacre occurred during the war and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians, including women and children. The Bishkek Protocol in 1994 called for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of forces from occupied territories, as well as the eventual signing of a peace agreement. Nevertheless, low-level conflict persisted until 2020 without a final peace agreement in place. It should be noted that a fifth of Azerbaijan's territory is currently occupied.

During the war between the two former Soviet countries, Russia was expected to take the lead in persuading the parties to end the conflict. However, Russia remained passive, particularly while Azerbaijan's lands were being occupied and its people were being forced to migrate. Unfortunately, other regional and international organizations, including the OSCE, also failed to play an active role in resolving the tensions in the area. In 1992, the OSCE Minsk Group co-chaired by the US, France, and Russia aimed to resolve the Karabakh conflict through multiple meetings, albeit unsuccessfully. This outcome indicates the insufficient capacity of OSCE<sup>1</sup>. It is seen that the co-chairs cannot play an effective role in solving the problem. In the 2020 war, Armenia anticipated direct support from Russia, but

since the 1990s, Russia abstained from intervening in the conflict directly. This policy has enabled Russia to more easily exert control over both warring countries. Despite the Kremlin's leading role in the normalization process between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which began in 2020, its policy of not forcing these countries to reach a peace agreement contributes to maintaining their dominance over the region. Hence, it can be contended that Russia's approach to resolving the conflict has remained unaltered for a significant duration.

### New Reality in the Region

With the 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh War, which started in 2020 and lasted for 6 weeks, the Azerbaijani army began to liberate its occupied territories. The war ended in a ceasefire in November 2020 under the mediation of Russia. At the end of the war, the Azerbaijani army liberated many occupied territories, and the ceasefire agreement required the Armenians to surrender the surrounding Kazakh and Aghdam region to Azerbaijan before 20 November 2020. In 2023, the parties agreed on the deployment of 1960 lightly armed military personnel and some military equipment belonging to Russia along the Lachin Corridor, where tensions rose. It can be said that Russia has strengthened its control in the region in this way. In particular, the fact that Turkey, which provided great military support to Azerbaijan in the war, did not take part in the ceasefire agreement was interpreted in some international reports as that Turkey and Azerbaijan relations could be badly affected. However, in the ongoing process, Turkey continues to be one of the most important allies of Azerbaijan with its

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<sup>1</sup> (Kaya & Özdal, 2023)

historical ties and supports Azerbaijan in the disputes over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia, which has not ended its occupation of Azerbaijani territories despite the 4 UN resolutions since the 1990s<sup>2</sup>, had to withdraw from these lands as a result of the defeat it suffered in the war that broke out in 2020. Azerbaijani President Aliyev described the map shaped after the war as the "New Reality in the Region" and stated that everyone must comply with it.



**Source:** Kaynak: SIPRI 2021 Yearbook, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2021/05>

### Strategic Region: Lachin Corridor

In the period from 2020 to 2023, no peace treaty has yet been signed. The attention on the Caucasus shifted to Eastern Europe in 2020 due to the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022. Russia's military and diplomatic focus on the Ukrainian War was met with the reaction of both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Following criticisms from Armenia and Azerbaijan that Russia did not take an active role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the EU initiated mediation efforts between the two nations. On 15 July 2023,

the heads of state of Azerbaijan and Armenia, along with the President of the European Commission, convened in Brussels for negotiations. The meeting, which took place between two former Soviet countries with the EU as mediator, and the subsequent peace agreement garnered significant media attention. These EU initiatives aim to address the void left by Russia in the region, caused by the Ukraine War. The communication between the two countries was reopened, and concerns about Russia's influence in the area were raised. Following the Brussels meeting, Russia promptly responded by arranging meetings with Aliyev and Pashinyan, which can be interpreted as their attempt to regain control in the region. In particular, the statements on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity were made in order to strengthen Russia's relations with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's increasing political influence in the region has also led to these statements. Although an EU-led peace agreement appears improbable in the near future, the involvement of other diplomatic powers in the region, apart from Russia, can be viewed as a significant and innovative development.

Beyond all these diplomatic power struggles, an additional factor affecting the peace talks between the two countries is the tension surrounding the Lachin Corridor. Lachin is a strategically significant city located in the Karabakh region. During the war in the 1990s, Lachin was one of the first cities that Armenian forces attempted to capture. The Lachin Corridor, which was subsequently opened in the area, remains the only link between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. As a stipulation of the 2020

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/azerbaycan-cephe-hatti/daglik-karabagdaki-igale-son-verilmesini-ongoren-bmgk-kararlari-uygulanmiyor/1989110>

agreement, Russian security forces provide control in the Lachin Corridor. The corridor, which holds political significance, is used by Armenia to assert dominance over the region.

In December 2022, a group of individuals identifying as climate activists barricaded the Lachin corridor, obstructing vehicle passage and they alleged that the de facto Armenian authority in the area was engaging in illegal mining and causing environmental harm. The Azerbaijani government acknowledged the legitimacy of these complaints but denied any involvement. The case was later brought to the Hague Court of Justice, resulting in a crisis warning regarding essential consumer goods in the region. It was declared that the barricades ought to be removed<sup>3</sup>.

In the following period, Azerbaijan established a checkpoint stating that Armenia was smuggling weapons into the region. Armenia, on the other hand, sent aid trucks to the region in July 2023, but these trucks could not pass through the Azerbaijani checkpoint.

Armenia has accused Azerbaijan of ethnic cleansing due to the endangerment of Armenians in the region. Increased tension arose when Red Cross trucks were unable to pass through the area. Azerbaijan countered by stating that Armenia was intentionally provoking conflict via the Lachin Corridor. Meanwhile, Armenia appealed to the international community, citing decisions made by the UN and The Hague. Azerbaijan has affirmed that there are no security concerns and accused

Armenia of attempting to gain control over ethnic Armenians residing in the region. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has put forward a substitute route via Aghdam - Khankendi for transporting essential consumer items to the area. Armenia's failure to utilise this route has elicited a reaction from Azerbaijan, reinforcing their conviction that Armenia is tampering with the region.

Finally, Armenia appealed to the United Nations Security Council asserting that there was a humanitarian crisis in Karabakh. The UN made a statement after the meeting, stating that the Lachin Corridor should be reopened for humanitarian aid<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, UN representatives from certain EU nations and the USA underscored the necessity of opening the Lachin Corridor.

Azerbaijan reminded the UN resolutions against the occupation of Karabakh and Armenia's failure to implement them and said that Armenia could not justify any UN resolution. Azerbaijan additionally mentioned that Armenia's instigation of incidents against Azerbaijan in the world arena has impaired the ongoing negotiations for peace between the two countries. The Russian delegation at the UN also emphasised that Armenia should abstain from raising any issues on the UN agenda.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, declared that Azerbaijan, as a sovereign country, has legitimate security concerns and that Armenia is trying to exert pressure by using the demographic

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/180/180-20230222-PRE-01-00-EN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15384.doc.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/what-happened-in-un-security-council-meeting-on-karabakh-humanitarian-crisis.html>

structure in the region<sup>6</sup>. It is quite natural for Turkey to support Azerbaijan in this process. Apart from their cognate ties, Azerbaijan and Turkey have strong economic, diplomatic and military ties that have developed especially in recent years. The development of existing ties provides both countries with an important support for their increasing activities in the region.

In light of this, it is a foreseeable fact that Turkey will continue to support Azerbaijan's legitimate aspirations. Turkey and Azerbaijan recognised the effectiveness of their military cooperation during the war in 2020. The serious security challenges in the region have led the two countries to an alliance beyond strategic partnership. Moreover, the ongoing war in Ukraine requires sustainable energy cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan. The strong relations of these two countries with Russia have also been beneficial for the West, especially with the Russian-Ukrainian War. As a matter of fact, Turkey's mediator role in the Ukraine War is indisputable. At this point, Azerbaijan can also play a role in solving the energy crisis. Moreover, both Azerbaijan and Turkey have increased their influence in the region in recent years. The increasing influence of both countries in the region shows that mutual support, especially in the context of security problems, will be effective gains for Turkey and Azerbaijan. The protection of the territories recaptured by the Azerbaijani army in the Karabakh War will be an important gain for Azerbaijan to achieve what it wants in peace agreements. Russia's recent emphasis on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity is a result of Azerbaijan's growing

influence in the region and is an important development. In addition, there is an article in the ceasefire text that may be important in Azerbaijan's future policies. This article, which envisages the opening of a new transport route, has also caused controversy in Armenia. This article stipulates that Armenia will open new lines between the western regions of Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, which will allow the movement of civilians, transport vehicles and freight vehicles in both directions. The Zangezur Corridor, which is being discussed in connection with this article, is planned to connect the western provinces of Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan. Although it is expected that Armenia will not allow such a road on its territory, this corridor is expected to gain an important place on the agenda in the future, like the Lachin Corridor. Azerbaijan and Turkey are keen to open this new route. If Azerbaijan succeeds in constructing this road, its effects will not be limited to Azerbaijani territory. Through Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan's land connection with Turkey will also increase. Strengthening the land connection of the two allies is of great importance for the development of economic and military cooperation.

Although Armenia has faced significant economic challenges following the war, it has recently improved its ties with regional and international players, including the EU, China, and Iran. Strengthened partnerships with influential nations and organisations can aid in the country's development and restore Armenia's waning regional clout since the Second Karabakh War. In this way, the Armenian government seeks alliances that can assist its cause,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/disisleri-bakanligindan-lacin-yolundaki-durum-hakkinda-aciklama/2967544>

particularly with regards to the Lachin Corridor matter. As a peace treaty has not yet been finalized, Azerbaijan should monitor these diplomatic efforts closely.

In conclusion, the Lachin Corridor is a region that Armenia will continue to exploit on human rights grounds. The Armenian population majority in the Nagorno-Karabakh region enables Armenia to maintain its political claims in the region. Having lost its military effectiveness, Armenia's attempt to gain the upper hand by using the Armenian population majority in the demographic distribution has been one of the important stages in the three-year ceasefire process and has brought the problem back to the agenda of the international public opinion by escalating the tension. After the invasions and wars that created serious security problems in the Caucasus region, Armenia's claims of isolation of the region from the world through the blockade of the Lachin Corridor and ethnic discrimination against the Armenian population have difficulties in the ongoing diplomatic negotiations. Considering that the Lachin Corridor issue was raised by using the majority Armenian population in the region, Azerbaijan needs to integrate this population into its own society. It is seen that both countries are trying to increase their gains by strengthening their regional and international relations during the peace negotiations. In this context, it is expected that new actors will try to be effective in the peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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